

## Re-floating *Winsome*

By Carolyn Shearlock; photo credit: **Sunlover Connie, Victoria on *Chez Moi* and Stephanie on *Summer Wind***

*Winsome*, an Acapulco 40 cutter weighing 12 tons was one of the 18 boats that went ashore in Puerto Escondido when Hurricane Marty hit on Monday, September 22, 2003. She was left high and dry on the shore about 4 miles south of Puerto Escondido. Thirty or more of the cruisers who had weathered the hurricane at Puerto Escondido had formed themselves into an ad hoc boat recovery team. In the first three days after the hurricane, they had recovered *Toy Boat*, *Allie*, *Debutante*, *La Sirena*, *Distant Vision*, *Wild Flower* and *Mahayana* from their trips to shore, along with raising a sunken fishing boat from its spot next to the dinghy dock. With each success (there were no failures), the team had learned more and more “tricks of the trade.”

Now came the biggest test – refloating *Winsome*, by far the hardest aground of the boats. She lay on her port side, bow furthest on shore. Even at high tide, *Winsome* was firmly aground. Her rudder was badly damaged, and in the first hours after the storm a few items had been stolen from the boat before John and Victoria from *Chez Moi* began guarding her. Stanchions and lifelines were broken, and the hull scratched up, but her hull appeared to be sound.

*Winsome*’s owner and builder, Irwin Layne, arrived at Puerto Escondido Thursday night and spent the night aboard the boat. Plans were made to try to refloat her Friday evening with the high tide. Late Friday morning, a backhoe arrived and dug a trench around her. With this, *Winsome* began to stand upright and rolled over onto her starboard side. Unfortunately, the beach shoaled out a ways and the backhoe could not cut a trench all the way to deep water. The team would have to try to pull her out –



backwards.

At 6 PM, as the tide began rising, the team arrived on *The Cat's Meow*, a 52-foot custom converted fishing trawler with a 280 horsepower, 800 cubic inch International Harvester marine engine and a 42 inch propeller on her single screw. Three powerful dinghies from *Kindred Spirit*, *Springbok* and *Chez Moi* were also brought down to act as bow and stern thrusters for *The Cat's Meow* to keep her in perfect alignment as the tow line was hooked up and also to bring the tow line from *Winsome* to *The Cat's Meow*.



On *The Cat's Meow*, her captain, Martin Hardy, steered from his top deck with Dario from *Ballena* beside him directing the dinghy thrusters. Katya of *Kindred Spirit* sat at the main steering station and relayed water depths to Martin via radio. *Champagne's* Larry, Tim of *Casual Water* and Richard from *Mahayana* manned the fantail, handling lines. Robin Hardy coordinated the fantail action with Martin at the steering station, and Erin from *Ballena*, Stephanie from *Summer Wind* and Carolyn of *Que Tal* were available to do anything they could.



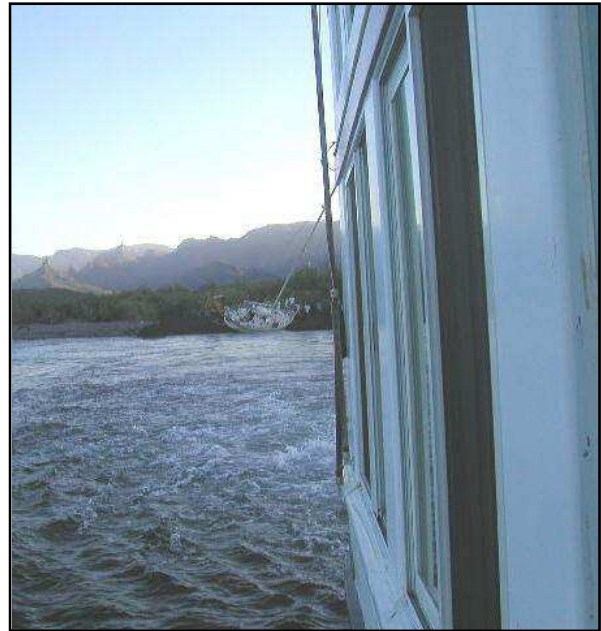
Also on hand were Elvin and Connie in their ponga, *SeaLover*, with Dave of *Que Tal* aboard to handle lines. Johnny Johnson of *Topaz*, a 15-time off-road Baja 1000 winner turned cruiser, brought his 4x4 to the beach to try to help push. Dee (“Flutterby” from the nearby settlement at Juncalitio) was with him to handle radio duties while he drove. All in all, cruisers from 12 boats were on hand to help in the operation, plus Dee.

*The Cat's Meow* circled into place as she had with each of the other boats, Dario yelled “Thusters! Port bow! . . . Now port stern! . . . Steady! Keep her right there!” and Patrick and Diane of *Springbok* brought the tow line to Larry at the stern. A group of Mexicans on the shore, led by Adrian, the Assistant Port Captain for Loreto, were in place to pull on the staysail halyard to heel *Winsome* over while *The Cat's Meow* tugged. Everything was in place to pull her off. Martin got the signal to put *The Cat's Meow* in gear, the dinghies backed off, and everyone waited with bated breath as the slack was taken out of the line.

Slowly Martin powered up *The Cat's Meow*, and smoke began billowing out of her stack. SNAP! THUNK! #\$(\*!! *The Cat's Meow* surged forward as the tow line – 400 feet of 1” gold



mega-braid used only in this week's salvage efforts and with a breaking strength of over 33,000 pounds – parted and recoiled smack into *The Cat's Meow's* dinghy hanging on the stern davits. Although the outboard was damaged, the dinghy absorbed most of the shock and probably protected the fantail crew from serious injury. The dinghy was quickly lowered and tethered in a safer position.



The fantail crew hurriedly pulled the tow line in as Martin circled *The Cat's Meow* back around for another try. Now he knew the line's breaking point and would try to keep the RPMs below that. *Springbok* moved in to take the tow line, the fantail crew played it back out, Dario yelled for the thrusters, Katya relayed depths to Martin, and Dave aboard the ponga tied the line back together with two bowlines. When everything was in place, *SeaLover* and the dinghies moved to safe spots and the fantail crew scurried back inside *The Cat's Meow*. Adrian and his crew pulled on the staysail halyard. Again, the roar of *The Cat's Meow's* engine could be heard as Martin revved her up. No movement. Martin nudged the RPMs a little higher. No movement. Another nudge. SNAP! The line had parted in the loop of the bowline where it had been tied together. The whole crew groaned. This was going to be a lot harder than anticipated. We had to rethink the strategy.

It was clear that *Winsome* would have to be heeled over further for the next attempt. Her mainsail halyard had been removed for the hurricane season, but she had mast steps. Mike from *Kindred Spirit*, who has to be half monkey, climbed the mast and strung a line through the masthead sheave. To get a sufficient length, another line had to be tied to it, then an anchor was kedged out as far as possible to *Winsome's* starboard side. When Irwin tried to tighten the line using the halyard winch, however, the line just stretched until the knot was at the mast head. The plan was changed – Mike would get in the middle of the line with his dinghy and worked his way as close to *Winsome* as he could so that hang on the line as another attempt was made. Adrian and his crew left as it was now dusk and they had to find their way along the very rough track back to the road.



Erin from *Ballena* and Carolyn from *Que Tal* were ferried ashore in a dinghy to coordinate communications

between *The Cat's Meow* and *Winsome*, and to try to push or otherwise do what they could to help get her off. With Erin relaying information, *The Cat's Meow* moved into place yet again, the thrusters sped from their stand off positions when Dario yelled for them, and Katya's voice came over the radio saying, "Martin, the depthsounder says 4 and a half." We all knew that *The Cat's Meow* drew 6 feet, and wondered how much of an offset the depthsounder had. If *The Cat's Meow* went aground, there wasn't another boat powerful enough to pull her off. "OK, it says 8 now." Whew!

Since the bowline repair had parted, John from *Chez Moi* suggested using a rolling hitch to tie the tow line back together. That done, *The Cat's Meow* took up the strain, Mike pulled on the masthead line, the shore crew of Johnny and Carolyn pushed on the bow sprit, and Erin relayed the progress to *The Cat's Meow*: "We're feeling a little wiggle . . . maybe moving a few millimeters . . . no more movement . . . try a little more power . . . it's wiggling again." Again the line parted, but the crew was optimistic – *Winsome* was standing up straighter and was moving slightly with the motion of the water plus the tide was continuing to rise (high tide was forecast at 11:01 PM). The rolling hitch had held, so the line was put back together with another one.

It was now about 8 PM and the team decided to wait for a little more tide to come in. The tidal range was only about 2 feet from low to high, but every inch would help. *SeaLover* made a quick run back to Puerto Escondido for what was hoped would be a stronger tow line, and a radio call was made back to the anchorage to ascertain how much more the tide would rise. As darkness descended and mosquitoes attacked those on shore, the dinghies returned to *The Cat's Meow* for a quick plate of food and ferried plates to the shore crew along with flashlights. The other tow line turned out to be too short, but the good news was that the tide would rise another 0.6 feet.

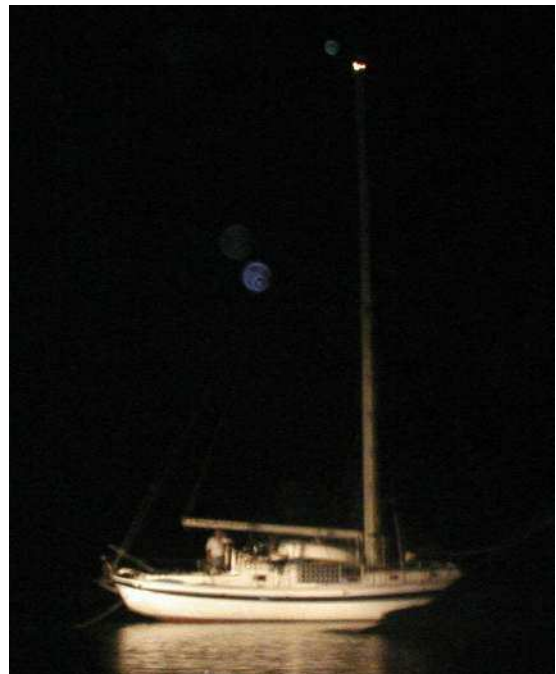
While waiting for the tide, the team tried putting on slow tension with the ponga, *SeaLover*, in the center of the tow line, pulling out to one side. While the shore crew could feel *Winsome* moving backward a millimeter at a time, no major progress was made. Then Johnny put a line from *Winsome's* bow to his trailer hitch to pull *Winsome's* bow to port and astern. Along with the ponga's steady tension, and Mike hanging onto the mast line, *Winsome's* movement could now be measured in inches instead of millimeters. AHA!! We had a promising technique. The next try would use *The Cat's Meow* plus Johnny's 4x4. The team also decided that *Winsome* needed to heel over more than what Mike could do, so *SeaLover* was called in to cleat off the line to its stern and use its larger engine to provide pull.

Irwin, who had watched the backhoe dig the trench, became concerned that *The Cat's Meow* was trying to pull *Winsome* over a shallow area that the backhoe had not been able to reach. At first, the shore crew tried to direct *The Cat's Meow* by saying "head more north" or "head more south". Martin would try to jockey *The Cat's Meow* into position, and Dario could be heard yelling directions to the dinghy thrusters, trying to be heard over their engines. Frustration grew as the line up was never right and the shore crew had difficulty explaining what was needed. Finally, the shore crew hit on the idea of using the binnacle compass on *Winsome* to tell *The*

*Cat's Meow* the best compass course for the pull. Instantly, everyone was working together again.

Getting the line up correct, however, was another story as *The Cat's Meow* had previously anchored in what they thought was the correct spot for the pull – which turned out to be about 10 degrees south of optimum. Communications again got a little testy as the shore crew asked why they couldn't just pick up the anchor. It seems that *The Cat's Meow* had the tow line tight to their stern, and the anchor rode was fully extended off the bow. The tide was almost fully in as *The Cat's Meow* and *Springbok's* dinghy worked feverishly to drop the tow line and dinghy it out of the way of *The Cat's Meow's* propeller, then *The Cat's Meow* hauled in their entire anchor rode, repositioned (“Thrusters! Starboard bow!” . . . “Martin, 4 feet” . . . “That angle looks good from shore”) and reattached the tow line.

Everything in place and the tide almost at its peak, *The Cat's Meow* shone her monstrous spot light on *Winsome* and Erin directed the action. “Start pulling, Elvin . . . okay, Johnny, now you pull . . . *Cat's Meow*, a little pull . . . Elvin, keep rocking it . . . Johnny, forward and back, not too hard . . . she's moving a little . . . keep pulling . . . keep pulling . . . . she's moving . . .” SNAP! Johnny's 4x4 seemed to break the suction around the hull and she had moved a few feet before the tow line had parted. For the first time, we had significant movement! Spirits were much higher as Johnny repositioned his 4x4 a little further up the bank for the next try and everyone got back into place with the tow line reattached.



Another pull, again with the 4x4 helping on shore, and *Winsome* moved about 4 more feet, started to pick up steam, and then stopped sharply with a shudder. At Erin's yell, *The Cat's Meow* and *SeaLover* went into neutral instantly, while the shore crew assessed what had happened. Because of the bottom contour, she was now hard aground again, more on her side, and off to the south side of the trench that had been dug. Patrick and Diane of *Springbok*, who were manning the dinghy that was ferrying the tow line between *The Cat's Meow* and *Winsome*, had a portable depthfinder aboard and sounded the entire area between *Winsome* and deep water so that the team could figure out the best way to try the next pull.

Morale was ebbing as the tide peaked; this was a lot harder than anyone had dreamed. Could we get her off tonight?? The team decided that it looked like *Winsome* was sitting far enough to the south side of the trench that we might be able to hook the tow line to her bow, swing her around and pull her out bow first. Irwin quickly moved the bridle as *The Cat's Meow* repositioned herself with the help of the dinghy thrusters. Since the line hadn't parted, we were shortly ready

for the next attempt. Cheers erupted as the turn around worked, but *Winsome* was no further out to sea when the line parted again. However, with the bow first, less damage was likely to be done to her as she was dragged over the shoal. With her full keel and cutaway forefoot, she would also be more likely to slide over the shoal instead of cutting into it with the rudder stock.

Almost midnight and with the tide beginning to drop, there was time for one more try if everyone worked fast. All the stops were pulled out to get her to heel over as far as possible and the radio was filled with ideas. The ponga, *SeaLover*, had not been able to get a solid 90 degree pull on the masthead line by going to the west. Further, the deep part of the trench was now to *Winsome's* port side. So she'd be heeled to starboard for the final try which would put the ponga on her east side with more room to work and would hopefully let the keel slide through the trench. Quickly, the shore crew was ferried aboard *Winsome* to wing-out her boom and sit on it. Johnny, his 4x4 no longer needed, edged his way out to the end of the boom and sat there, clinging to the topping lift, his feet braced on the preventer line. Carolyn, from *Que Tal*, crawled out and laid atop the boom next to him, clinging to the boom for dear life. *SeaLover* repositioned and pulled the mast line.

*The Cat's Meow's* spot light came back on and Erin called the action from the deck of *Winsome*. "Ponga, start pulling . . . the gunwale is going under . . . the water is almost to the portholes." The spot light showed *Winsome* almost on her side, with the boom tip under water and Johnny up to his chest in water and Carolyn sliding down the boom head first but still holding on. "OK, *Cat's Meow*, start pulling!" A sound like a car skidding on a gravel road could be heard. "She's moving . . . she's really moving . . . we're going." *Winsome* slid over the gravel and sand, picking up speed. She was free!!

Just as the cheering started, Dave's voice could be heard from *SeaLover*: "STOP! STOP! STOP!" *The Cat's Meow* was already in neutral, but the elasticity of the tow line had caused *Winsome* to shoot forward as she came off the sand bar, and her mast to stand straight up. The mast head line was cleated to the stern of the ponga, and it was now being towed backwards by *Winsome*, and swamped. Before Elvin could cut the line, Dave managed to uncleat it, but the damage was done – the ponga was almost underwater.

The dinghies rushed over to the ponga and held her steady while the bailing began. Once stable, they left to help *Winsome* again – only to hear "Mayday!" over the radio as a slight shift in weight caused water to begin flooding the ponga again. Totally underwater but with the motor still running, Elvin was able to beach her in the hole just left by *Winsome*. Johnny's 4x4 came to the rescue again, pulling *SeaLover* totally out of the water so she could be bailed out completely.

Now after 1 AM on a totally moonless night, *The Cat's Meow* decided not to try to tow *Winsome* back to the harbor, especially as *Winsome* had no rudder. Irwin put down *Winsome's* anchor and turned her anchor light on, then checked her for leaks. None. Good news for all the crew!

Once the ponga was dry, the dinghies began to tow it back to *The Cat's Meow* so that the engine could be washed out with freshwater. After seeing them off, Johnny and Dee began their drive home. The next radio transmission left everyone astounded as Dee said: "We're not sure we can



get off the beach. We might have to leave the truck and get a ride back on the boat. Don't leave yet." What more could happen?? The backhoe had apparently gotten stuck getting from the beach to the road, and had dug its way along the road, leaving a series of square holes right down the center. Johnny, a 15-time winner of the Baja 1000, took a flashlight and scouted the area. The next radio report said that they were going to try it cross country, going over the mangroves! Johnny told Dee to hold on tight, hit the gas, and somehow found his way through as mangroves kept whacking his face through the window he'd forgotten to close. The final report confirmed everyone's faith in Johnny: "We've reached the highway and are on our way to the harbor."

Finally, *SeaLover* was brought alongside *The Cat's Meow* and the engine washed out with freshwater and otherwise taken care of after its dunking. A few beers were cracked open, and Robin made coffee to warm everyone up, particularly those who had gotten wet. By the time *The Cat's Meow* got back to Puerto Escondido and anchored, it was after 3:30 AM – the rescue had taken almost as long as the hurricane!

Early Saturday morning, after only a few hours' sleep, *Ballena* and *Springbok* took their dinghies back down to *Winsome* and brought her home to Puerto Escondido's inner harbor. Welcome back!

Boats helping out:

*The Cat's Meow* – Martin and Robin Hardy (luckily they have a second dinghy motor to use while theirs is being repaired)

*Champagne* – Larry (also provided tow line, which is now in about 6 pieces!)

*Casual Water* – Tim

*Mahayana* – Richard

*Ballena* – Dario and Erin

*Kindred Spirit* – Mike and Katya

*Chez Moi* – Victoria and John

*Springbok* – Patrick and Diane (with their portable depth sounder)

*Topaz* – Johnny Johnson with his Chevy Blazer 4x4

*SeaLover* – Elvin and Connie

*Que Tal* – Dave and Carolyn

*Summer Wind* – Stephanie (and Bill via radio checking tide graphs)

And *Calliope* – who acted as the dinghy parking service and ferry for those aboard *The Cat's Meow*

### What we learned:

- Get the longest, strongest tow line possible. The weight of the boat plus the suction and friction of the bottom put a huge load on it. Our tow line had a breaking strength of over 33,000 pounds and yet kept breaking. Its 400-foot length was just long enough to reach *The Cat's Meow* without putting her in dangerously shallow water.
- When the tow line broke, rolling hitches worked well to tie it back together. Bowlines did not work.

- A very powerful power boat is key. Without *The Cat's Meow's* pulling power, all the other efforts would have been for naught.
- We had three dinghies and a panga available to help out. We could have used more, particularly as thrusters to line up *The Cat's Meow*. As the tide was coming in and a light breeze sprang up, Martin had a hard time keeping her in place.
- We needed more handheld VHF's. Every boat needs to have one, plus every station on the tow boat and the various shore crew. We should have asked people in the anchorage who weren't involved in the action to loans theirs, and we should all have taken spare batteries along.
- The more flashlights, the better. Again, we should have borrowed more. When we started, it was still light. But as night fell – with no moon – we needed lights everywhere!
- We had learned earlier in the week that things seemed to take longer than expected, and many people came with large dishes or drinks to share. As the rescue extended into the night, it was quickly consumed.
- Having one person relaying information from the shore crew and between all boats and the shore crew was critical. The improved communications really got everyone “pulling together.” We should have done a better job of repeating orders back to confirm that all messages were understood.
- It seemed that we started too early for the state of the tide. However, by starting shortly after low tide, we had time to assess the situation and try a number of different things.
- The 4x4 on shore was key for breaking the suction. We were lucky that *Winsome* was lying in such a way as to make it possible for Johnny to help pull her . . . and we were really lucky to have an experienced off-road driver in the team.
- Heeling *Winsome* over sufficiently was the toughest thing to do, and the most important. The line to the mast head instead of the staysail halyard, using the ponga, getting a 90 degree line of pull and the people on the boom were all important. We couldn't heel her over far enough until we did ALL of those things.
- We should have attached the line to the mast head in the afternoon, prior to the first attempt to pull her off. The staysail halyard was not effective.
- Getting *Winsome* turned around so that she was bow out was the second critical step. This made her much, much easier to slide over the sand and reduced the strain on the tow line.
- The verdict is out as to whether the backhoe helped. With the trench, *Winsome* was partially in the water and did float in her own little “pond” as the tide rose. However, her keel was now catching on the edge of that pond as we tried to tow her backwards. Overall, the backhoe's work is probably what let us get her turned bow out.
- We should have had a knife unsheathed and ready at every station that had a line under tension. This would have saved the ponga.
- Using compass courses to direct where to pull worked much better than using landmarks on shore or “a little more north.”
- *Springbok's* portable depth sounder made a big difference in letting us figure out the scope of the problem. We thought we only had a small hump to get *Winsome* over, when



we actually had an 80’ shoal before deep water. This information caused us to change strategy. We should have done this in the afternoon before the first attempt.

- The people on the boom, in particular, should have had PFD’s on in case they slipped off the boom – or were flung off it as *Winsome* straightened up. Actually, everyone in the small boats should have had PFD’s on or at least at hand.
- Thankfully, *Winsome* had bug spray for the shore crowd. The mosquitoes were vicious after the rain that accompanied the hurricane.
- It turned out to be important to know not just when the high tide was, but to know how high it was at various times. *Summer Wind* had a computer program with tide graphs and Bill’s relaying of this information was very helpful (he had been listening on the rescue’s working channel and knew we needed it).
- We should have reduced the weight of *Winsome* as much as we could before trying to refloat her: emptying water and fuel tanks, removing the anchors and chains, removing the dinghy lashed to the deck, possibly taking part of her batteries out, and so forth. It would have raised her waterline slightly, but more importantly, it would have reduced the strain on the tow line.
- Our quick success with the other grounded boats made the team anxious to pull *Winsome* off. We probably would have been better off to spend another day prepping her and assessing the situation before calling in the backhoe. Once the trench was dug, we had to act on the next high tide as the rising water caused the trench to begin to fill in.
- The sheer determination of the rescue team played a large part in the ultimate success. We were not going to give up on her!!